

# Planning your trip

## Applying for a visa

1. The best sources of information about matters related to US visas are the US Consulate websites and the Office of International Students & Scholars at Rice. If you have any questions whatsoever, email the OISS office at [ois@rice.edu](mailto:ois@rice.edu). **Do not take any chances when it comes to applying for your visa!**
2. When you receive your I-20 or DS-2019, you will need to apply for your F-1/J-1 visa at a U.S. consulate or embassy. You cannot apply for your visa earlier than 120 days from the start date on your I-20 form – **apply as early as possible** within this framework.
3. There are five US consulates in India – in New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata and Hyderabad. Visit the website of the US consulate closest to your hometown and follow the procedures for documentation, interview request, etc. In general, you should keep the following documents with you for the interview:
  - a. A valid Indian passport.
  - b. I-20 or DS-2019
  - c. Admission letter from Rice University
  - d. Financial documents to prove you have the funds required for a least a year's stay in the U.S. (as indicated on the I-20 or DS-2019)
  - e. Proof of payment of the SEVIS fee. All F-1 and J-1 visa applicants need to pay the onetime SEVIS fee prior to applying for a visa. Keep your receipt as proof of payment to present to the US Consulate, port of entry officials when entering the US, OISS upon check-in, and for your records. For more information visit [www.FMJfee.com](http://www.FMJfee.com)
  - f. Completed visa application forms – be sure to indicate your name as stated on your passport and your I-20/DS-2019 documents to better ensure that your name on your visa stamp will be displayed properly.
  - g. Visa appointment payment receipt
  - h. GRE & TOEFL original score reports
4. If you are currently enrolled at another school in the U.S. but will be leaving the US prior to coming to Rice: if your visa from your former university has not expired, you can still use it, as long as you have a valid I-20 from Rice when re-entering the US. You may get a new visa, but it is not necessary. If you will not be leaving the US, you should still check in with OISS when arriving at Rice.

# Booking a flight

1. New graduate students **must attend the Graduate Orientation** which occurs in August before classes start. Make sure to book your flight so that you arrive in time for this! Check with your department if you need to arrive sooner to attend departmental orientation. Your date of entry in the US must be **within 30 days of the start date** of your academic program as listed on the I-20 form, and **within the dates of validity for your visa**.
2. Try to **minimize the number of stops at intermediate airports**. As of March 2012, there are no direct flights from India to Houston. However, there are several airlines (Emirates, Qatar Airways, etc.) which fly from India to Houston with a single stop.
3. Try to **avoid changing airlines within a single journey**. If a change of airlines cannot be avoided:
  - a. Make sure that there is at least 4-6 hours gap/layover between the scheduled arrival of one flight and the scheduled departure of the connecting flight. Depending on where you are stopping (e.g. Heathrow airport in London), there may be additional screening before you are allowed to enter the terminal upon arrival, and this usually takes time.
  - b. You have to go through **immigration processing** at the first US airport that you land in. This can take several hours. If you are flying to a different US city and then taking a domestic flight to Houston, make sure to leave an additional 2-3 hours between flights.
  - c. **Checked baggage** is usually **safe within a single** airline while change of airline sometimes leads to misplaced luggage. Some airlines will not transfer luggage and you may have to personally carry it to the check-in counter for your next flight. Check this with your **travel agent!**
4. Some airlines (e.g. Emirates) **offer accommodation** if you have a long layover (12-24 hours) between flights. Check with your travel agent or the airline website to see if you qualify.
5. The **weight/piece allowance for baggage** may vary for different airlines. Ask your travel agent about this or check the airline website.
6. When booking your flight, you can indicate whether you want **Hindu meal/Asian Vegetarian Meal (AVM)**, non-smoking section, etc.

7. Some airlines offer **Frequent Flier programs** (e.g. Continental One Pass, Lufthansa Miles and more, Star Alliance, etc.). Such programs are frequently free to enroll in and one can redeem miles traveled with that airline or its partners for upgrades, discounts, free flights, etc. You can enroll in such programs by creating an online account on relevant websites. Traveling home to India even once a year can lead to your accumulating a lot of miles!

## Things to ask your travel agent

1. What is the **weight limit for baggage**? What size suitcases are allowed?
2. What can I do if my flight gets **delayed or cancelled**? Should I get travel insurance?
3. When I stop at an intermediate airport, will the airline **transfer my bags** or will I have to take care of it myself?
4. Every person leaving India should have **ECNR (Emigration Check Not Required)** stamped on one of the last pages of your passport. For detailed information, contact your travel agent.
5. For questions on whether one needs **Income Tax clearance certificate**, contact your travel agent.

## Tips on packing

1. Start packing **at least 2-3 days before departure date**.
2. Buy strong suitcases - they should be able to withstand **a lot of mishandling**. They should be as large as possible within the size limitations (however, most airlines are quite lenient about baggage size).
3. As an example, here are the current (March 2012) baggage allowances for Economy class travel from India to the US on Emirates (please note that the specifications might be different for other airlines, other routes and other classes of travel):
  - a. Checked baggage: maximum allowance of **2 bags, up to 23 kg each**. Total dimensions (length + width + height) of each piece must not exceed 158 cm (62 inches). For Economy passengers with two pieces of luggage, the total combined dimensions of both pieces must not exceed 273 cm (107 inches). Customers with baggage exceeding these dimensions will be charged an additional fee.

- b. Cabin baggage: You can carry **one bag**, whose size of the bag (length + width + height) is not to exceed 115 cm (45.3 inches). The weight should not exceed 7 kg. In addition, you are allowed to carry **a laptop bag or purse**.
4. Put **identifying marks and labels** both inside & outside the suitcases, in addition to the labels provided by the airline.
5. Ideally, a student can bring 20-30% in cash and the remaining 70-80% of the total amount of money in traveler's checks. In case you are not funded by your department, carry with you a personal draft of the amount equal to one semester's expenses. Check your I-20 form to determine this amount.
6. Many departments will actually provide **office supplies such as pens, paper, notebooks, etc.** (you can check with your respective department if this is true) so you **do not need** to bring them with you.
7. Check with your department if there are **specific first-year courses** that you will be required to take. Try to contact the professor to determine the **required textbooks** and see if you can get them from India for cheaper.
8. **Don't buy electrical items from India** – the power supply here is 110V, while in India it is 220V; in addition, the power sockets are a different shape. **If you are buying a laptop in India**, make sure you get a power cord or an adaptor which can be used in the US.
9. Pack about **2 weeks' worth of clothing** – consider getting some loose clothes since they might shrink in machine wash or you might gain some weight! Summers are quite hot and sunny, so **cotton clothes** are really helpful. Winters are colder than you may have experienced before (temperatures reach 2-3°C).
10. Kitchen utensils can be quite expensive in US, but used items can be loaned from Loan Closet at nominal rate (see section below). Most apartments have electric stoves, so try to find **flat-bottomed pots and pans** – a normal kadai from Indian might not balance on an electric stove.

## Loan Closet facility at Rice Graduate Apartments

Many household items – utensils, cutlery, furniture, pillows, etc – can be obtained at a nominal annual fee (\$25) from the Rice Graduate Apartments Loan Closet: [gradloancloset.blogs.rice.edu](http://gradloancloset.blogs.rice.edu). This facility is available to all graduate students enrolled at Rice, even those who do not reside at the Rice Graduate Apartments.

# Checklist for packing

## Checked baggage

### ☐ Miscellaneous items

- ☐ Copies of certificates and documents (originals in cabin baggage)
- ☐ Books – light reading or textbooks
- ☐ Medical history file
- ☐ One pair chappals
- ☐ 1 or 2 towels
- ☐ 2 sets of bed sheets, pillow covers, etc. (beds at RGA/RVA are full size: 54in x 75in)
- ☐ Umbrella
- ☐ Blanket
- ☐ Soap
- ☐ Toothbrushes, Razors, etc.
- ☐ Comb, Nail cutter, etc.
- ☐ CDs/mp3s of music of your choice
- ☐ Spices, other food items, such as pickles, sweets, etc. (must be sealed completely)
- ☐ Spare set of glasses, contact lenses, contact lens solution, etc.
- ☐ School bag to take to classes

### ☐ Clothes

- ☐ Undergarments
- ☐ Socks
- ☐ Handkerchiefs
- ☐ Jacket
- ☐ Extra woolen sweater
- ☐ Swimwear
- ☐ Clothes for daily wear (jeans, T-shirts, etc.)
- ☐ Formal wear (at least 1 set, for presentations, conferences, etc.)
- ☐ Indian clothes for special occasions

### ☐ Shoes

- ☐ Men: Consider bringing a pair of leather shoes from India. Other types of shoes are not too expensive in the US
- ☐ Women: Nice shoes (heels) can be expensive in the US. Consider bringing some nice shoes from India if you want them.

### ☐ Cooking utensils

- ☐ 3-4 plates
- ☐ Bowls
- ☐ Knives, forks, spoons
- ☐ Ladles for serving

- ☐ Knife for cutting vegetables, etc. (A good sharp knife is ludicrously expensive in US)
- ☐ Frying pan/tava
- ☐ Pressure cooker
- ☐ Tongs
- ☐ Rolling pin
- ☐ Kadaï
- ☐ 2-3 storage containers
- ☐ Tumblers for water/beverages

## **Cabin baggage**

- ☐ Important documents
  - ☐ Passport
  - ☐ I-20 form
  - ☐ Financial documents (CA certificate, bank statements)
  - ☐ Admission letter
  - ☐ Affidavit from sponsor
  - ☐ College/school grade sheets and related certificates
- ☐ First aid medicines (for headache, nausea, fever, etc.)
- ☐ Reading material (novel/magazines/eReader for the flight or layover)
- ☐ Address book/phone book
  - ☐ Phone number for OISS (Office of International Students and Scholars)
  - ☐ Phone number for the individual who is meeting you at the airport
  - ☐ Your address in the US (needed for I-94 form)
- ☐ Copies of your photograph (passport size)
- ☐ 1 or 2 sets of clothes, in case checked baggage is misplaced
- ☐ Cash/travelers' checks

## **Things to leave with your family**

- ☐ Your address in the USA
- ☐ Phone numbers where you can be reached
- ☐ Phone number for OISS (Office of International Students and Scholars)
- ☐ Copies of all your important documents
- ☐ Copies of all relevant parts of medical history file
- ☐ Consider leaving a few blank signed papers so that your family can be authorized to look after anything on your behalf